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ABSTRACT

This report is based on the observations of the recent director/consultant of the Center for Evaluation and Policy Research (CEPR) at the University of Vermont concerning evaluation practices in educational research. The history of CEPR and descriptions of practices in managing the center, directing several research and evaluation projects, and teaching classes in educational evaluation comprise the bulk of this paper. The conclusion that CEPR is a viable organization is made on the foundation that society wants to know more about educational policies, programs, and procedures; to understand the advancement of theory and practice in organizing and conducting evaluation studies; and to assimilate the wealth of data generated by electronic and computer technology. (JAM)

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A Retrospective Examination of Evaluation Practices

A Consultant's Perspective[1]

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Ten years ago, spring of 1978, a sabbatical leave provided an opportunity to investigate the state-of-the-art practices in the field of educational evaluation. The sabbatical provided an opportunity to visit two evaluation centers[2] and investigate a variety of applied research projects in Great Britain. The background derived from these contacts aided in establishing a Center for Evaluation and Policy Research (CEPR) at the University of Vermont in the fall of 1979. The observations which follow are extracted from the experience of directing the Center, directing several research and evaluation projects, and teaching classes in educational evaluation. What follows is more background on these experiences through the present, some general observations implied by these experiences, and a few speculations about future evaluation practices. This personal case history explores a decade of roaming the educational terrain in an attempt to find better ways for the improvement of educational practice.

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[1] Paper presented at the New England Educational Research Organization Conference, Wednesday, April 27, 1988.

[2] Approximately a month was spent at the Center for Instructional Research and Curriculum Evaluation (CIRCE) at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and at the Center for Evaluation, Western Michigan University at Kalamazoo, Michigan.

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Background

To more fully appreciate and understand the observations explored later in this paper, there seems to be some merit in explaining the nature of the Center for Evaluation and Policy Research (CEPR) and related activities. The CEPR operation was conducted in a context of evolving evaluation practices and thus was influenced by national trends which are briefly explored. Finally, some attention is given to current interests which are markedly different from the early beginnings of CEPR.

CEPR opened its doors in the fall of 1979 with three faculty members (part time arrangements), a graduate assistant, and a full time secretary. The Center's stated purposes were clustered into the categories of evaluation and research efforts, coordination and leadership efforts, and resource efforts (See Attachment A.) Essentially the Center was interested in providing technical assistance and third party evaluation services. Over a six year period of time the Center engaged in nearly fifty projects. These projects were targeted at a variety of organizations including University of Vermont (UVM) (e.g., bilingual undergraduate program, vocational special education project, residential life experimental program, counselor education summer program, continuing education project for nurses, and nurse practitioner preparation program), Vermont State Department of Education (e.g., study of nontraditional vocational education students), human services agencies (e.g., congregated housing for the elderly project, a program for

certifying public managers), and public school projects (e.g., effective schools assessment studies). At the peak of the CEPR operation, personnel included a three quarter time director, a full time assistant director, two part time faculty, five graduate assistants, and a full time secretary. The Center grossed over $200,000 in grants during this period of time.

While the Center was operating at a fever pitch, a considerable amount of interest in evaluation was evident on the national scene. The organization which provided the best forum for exploring and examining various evaluation theories and practices was the Evaluation Network. This organization began modestly from a inaugural meeting of less than fifty persons in Snowmass, Colorado, and grew rapidly to nearly 2,000 memberships. The membership included persons from public schools, state departments of education, higher education and interestingly a number of persons from social services. The Network distributed a most practical publication Evaluation News (now called Evaluation Practice) which contained many valuable sources for both theory and practice of educational evaluation. Concurrent with the Evaluation Network's development were other national organizational efforts. These included the Evaluation Research Society, the Applied Social Research organization[3], and the establishment of Division H (School Evaluation and Program Development). The plethora of national organizations illustrated

[3] These two organizations and the Evaluation Network merged into one organization called the American Evaluation Association (AEA).

the sudden and significant interest of persons to exchange views on evaluation theory and practice. It was evident that a notable lag existed between the type of training people received and the needs of this new and emerging field. It became increasing clear that doctoral programs based on the traditional social science research paradigm was not fully adequate to requirements of this new field of enquiry.

Interests and activities peaked at about the time the Republicans gained control of the White House and a fiscal and political conservatism began to have its influence. Rather dramatically federal funds for research and demonstration projects began to ebb and the demand and support for evaluation studies declined as well. At UVM CEPR projects declined and the personnel and overhead needed to sustain the operation could not be justified. However, this did not mean an end of the need and interest in developing or maintaining effective school operations. In fact many of the persons involved in the efforts of the Center continued serving as consultants to various educational and social service organizations.

The experience and knowledge garnered from the intense operation of CEPR was an excellent backdrop for creating a new doctoral degree program at UVM in educational administration. This advance degree program has a strong emphasis on applied research, spurring further research in school effectiveness studies and the problems of linking organizational assessment studies to organizational change (Carlson, 1985, 1986, in press-a

& in press-b). A decade of a high degree of involvement in the conduct of evaluation studies, teaching, and research provided an excellent exposure to the emerging knowledge of practice, theories, and issues in educational evaluation. There were truly moments of agony and ecstacy sprinkled with moments of humor. The agony included a contractual dispute after having completed a comprehensive and carefully crafted investigation into nontraditional students in vocational settings. The dispute overshadowed the study to such a degree that its results remain buried in the State's bureaucracy. The ecstacy occurred when a team of graduate assistants and myself completed several case studies on nurse practitioners. The pleasure of observing the graduate students performed this task and how the results provided a rich record of dedicated individuals whose virtues were relatively unappreciated and unknown prior to our research. The humor never seem to be absent these endeavors. However, the experience of entrapping freshman and sophomore students long enough to complete a rather complicated survey at the University of Vermont will remain vivid for some time. These experiences taught humility and appreciation for the human side of the evaluation enterprise.

General Observations

The preceding provided and still provide many valuable insights for designing and implementing evaluation studies. A reflection on these experiences provides a context for several observations concerning the evolution of the practice of

educational evaluation. Over this period of time some ideas have endured and others forgotten. Issues continue to challenge the good will of evaluation professionals but possibly not at the same level of intensity. And with movements of this nature, new practices emerge. A brief review follows.

Three publications aid in observing the evolution of educational evaluation thought. Carlson (1976) and Worthen and Sanders (1973 & 1987) are publications which provide a comprehensive review of theory and practice in educational evaluation. A review of these publications reveal what has remained on the evaluation landscape and what has disappeared. For example, earlier models for conceptualizing evaluation studies were linked to their proponents. Thus, the literature was regale with the Stake, Stufflebeam, and Alkin Models. Today a more functional approach is used to delineate the differences in approaches. Thus, references are being made to the objectives-oriented, management-oriented, consumer-oriented, etc. evaluation approaches. Although Worthen and Sanders (1987) report a broad spectrum of evaluation approaches many of these are generally absent from the literature and appear to be used sparingly if at all. Some examples are Scriven's modus operandi and goal free evaluation, Stufflebeam's CIPP model, Hammond's cube, and the use of adversary approaches. These concepts graced the literature and caught the imagination of many in the early days but more recently their presence are not felt.

More recently it appears a blending of various models and

approaches have emerged. There is a growing acceptance of naturalistic approaches (e.g., Cook and Reichardt, 1979; Fetterman, 1984; Guba and Lincoln, 1981; Patton, 1980; and Stake, 1978) However, quantitative methodology continues to hold sway to some degree particularly for large scale studies (e.g., Boruch, et al., 1979, 1985a, 1985b; Rossi and Freeman, 1985) and for cost-benefit, cost-effectiveness studies (e.g., Levin, 1981, 1983; Mishan, 1976; and Rossi & Freeman, 1985).

The schizophrenia often associated with the conceptualization of evaluation designs has not ended but seems to have soften. For example, at the 1988 American Educational Research Association meeting in New Orleans, several paper presentations were given on the contrast and evolution of educational evaluation methodology (e.g., Session 12.44, Have Evaluation Theories Converged over Time? and Session 18.25, Methodological Perspective in Evaluative Research) In Session 12.44, many of the presenters summarized their observations into the categories of causal - descriptive and general - specific audience, illustrating the continued presence of dichotomous thinking. However, in session 18.25, the presenters reported on attempts at responding to a simulated RFP in quantitative and qualitative modes. Their responses demonstrated the problem of trying to remain faithful to a particular orientation when the situation could truly be better studied from a combination of paradigmatic approaches. There are still true believers, no doubt, as to the respective correctness of these competing

paradigms. However, there is much evidence of a synthesis or integration of practices which are derived from both orientations.

In addition to the eternal debate over the epistemology of evaluation theory and practice, other issues continue to occupy the concern of implementors and users of evaluation studies. Included in Carlson (1976) are issues of specification, evaluation of evaluation, evaluation bias, goal-free and goal-based evaluations, criterion-referenced vs. norm-referenced measurement, and political implications of evaluation studies. These issues still exist to one degree or another. However, many have evolved and more is understood about their implications for conducting evaluation studies. For example, evaluation of evaluation or meta evaluation has received considerable attention (See Joint Committee, 1981 and Stufflebeam, 1974).

The politics of evaluation continues to draw much attention and in some ways baffles the best of intentions. This is particularly true in light of the increase reliance and use of social science methodology in policy studies. Space and time do not permit the attention necessary to explore the complexities of this issue. Suffice to say, more is understood about the traps and subtle influences on evaluators particularly in situations that can be described as charged and political in nature. Specific suggestions in coping with unethical and political pressures are common in today's literature (Chelimsky, 1987 and Worthen and Sanders, 1987). This advice was limited and nearly

nonexistent ten years ago (Carlson, 1976 and Weiss, 1973).

Much has been learned over the past decade. Early models have given way to more integrated and varied approaches. A greater sensitivity of matching stakeholder needs and evaluation methodology is evident and legitimated. Preferred practice in the conduct of evaluation studies is driven more by the idiosyncratic nature of the evaluation setting. The dichotomous sharp edges of the evaluation issues have dulled a bit and more is known about the limits of evaluation technology and the promise of alternative viewpoints. A respectful and courteous exchange is more evident in the literature and at national and regional conferences.

Future Speculations

Crystal ball gazing is frivolous to some and potentially insightful to others. It seems a reflection of sorts is not complete without some attempt to wonder what the future may bring. Keeping in mind any prognostication by its very nature must deal in broad strokes. At some risk, the following speculations are proffered.

First, much like transportation systems which serve an universal need, come in many shapes and form, and share a common technology; so is the case with educational evaluation. The need to better understand our human condition particularly in education will continue to drive the search for knowledge. This search will be manifested in many ways but will no doubt continue to build upon the spectrum of theories and practices drawn from

the applied social sciences. This is to say, policy makers and practitioners will continue to have a need for knowledge and information about impact of their respectful domains. Thus, the future may be dotted with many and varied approaches which are evaluative in nature. For example, in the State of Vermont a Public School Approval (PSA)[4] policy exist which mandates a total school review using state standards and local and outside evaluation teams. Similarly, the Effective Schools Movement spawned various assessment models (e.g., Buttram & Carlson, 1983; Connecticut State Department of Education, 1981; and Research for Better Schools, 1986). The point is that many forms of evaluation are emerging and will carry a variety of labels. The thirst for insights is far from quench.

Some persons see the gentrification of the educational profession as a problem and others as a promise. The problems are well documented, however, the promises seem less apparent. One potential promise of an older and more experienced educational profession is its sophistication. As more persons earn their advanced degrees (masters through doctorate), the value of systematic enquiry will naturally follow. In the State of Vermont, there has been a ground swell for more institutes, conferences, and graduate courses which are research-based. Two events demonstrate this growing awareness of the benefits of using research in our schools. For many years the University of

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[4] Although there are mixed reviews of its impact. See for example Moore, 1985; Proulx, 1987; and Neidermeyer, 1988.

Vermont sponsored an institute for school improvement. For the past three years it has been a cosponsored event with a consortium of school districts and has been held at a field site. Because of the popularity of this institute, two sections, north and south, will be offered during the summer of 1988. Another example is the creation of a School Study Council, again cosponsored, and for its inaugural event is a research day at which many presentations are planned on current and ongoing research studies. Persons from several levels of education (e.g., teachers, administrators, professors, etc.) are presenting. The demands, the interests, and the wide spread participation in some form of enquiry are bound to grow with the maturing of the education profession.

Many experts on electronic technology have written about its potential impact on management information systems. It appears that in the foreseeable future the widespread use of micro computers with expanded memory and relative ease of access to data systems is about to take another leap forward. With each succeeding year it is possible to observe incremental increases in the number of computers in use, the number of persons with computer literacy, and the lower relative unit cost of computer hardware and software. Again, it seems reasonable to expect the nature of educational evaluation to be transformed. For example, a recent experimental project conducted in Vermont in special education involved uploading local site data on costs and on so called normative indicators directly to the State's mainframe

computer (Vermont Department of Education, 1987). Again it appears there are unlimited possibilities in sharing, aggregating and disaggregating data. All of which have implications for judging program quality and the nature of educational evaluation.

Presented here, albeit briefly, are some future possibilities which may alter appreciably our concepts of educational evaluation. New approaches and policies, heightened awareness and desire research based knowledge, and computer technology are but a few examples.

Summary

Many view change as threatening or liberating. The process of reflection, particularly over a decade of time, has a way of putting change in perspective. It is clear upon reflection that educational evaluation will continue to be shaped as in the past by societal needs to know, by advancing theory and practice in organizing and conducting of evaluation studies, and by emerging computer and electronic technology. Regardless of these new advances, the ecology of the school, its community, and the state in which both are embedded will provide the context for the future practice of educational evaluation. Recent research on organizational theory is beginning to provide a new and interesting perspective on the influence of culture on organizational change (Bolman & Deal, 1984; Carlson, in press-a, in press-b; Frost et al., 1985; Sarason, 1971; Schein, 1985). More research is needed to better understand this phenomenon of organizational culture and its influence on the conducting of

evaluation studies (Patton, 1985). In the mean time, evaluations will take place, will be debated, will be ignored or acted upon to one degree or another, and will take on many symbolic meanings. Tune in at eleven for the news and a report of the next decade of progress in making more sense of educational evaluation.

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The University of Vermont

ATTACHMENT A

The Center for Evaluation and Policy Research

The Center is an University based operation housed within the College of Education and Social Services designed to provide:

Evaluation and Research Efforts

1. . . technical assistance in the design, review and implementation of program or project evaluations

2. . . third-party evaluation services for projects or programs needing an impartial, external evaluator

3. . . meta-evaluation services for projects or program evaluation designs and secondary analysis of results from evaluation and policy research studies

Coordination and Leadership Efforts

4. . . leadership in stimulating inter-institutional (educational and social services) policy research and in conducting evaluation studies of related projects or programs

5. . . a limited number of training workshops in evaluation theory and practice and internship options for qualified graduate students

6. . . linkage with individuals and organizations with specialized knowledge and expertise

7. . . efforts in initiating and funding selected policy and evaluation studies

Resource Efforts

8. . . a resource center of related evaluation and policy research materials, books and sample case studies

Primary target groups for these services are educational institutions at the elementary, secondary and post secondary levels; social and human services organizations; and University of Vermont grants requiring third party evaluations.

For further information about these services, contact Dr. Robert V. Carlson, Director, 406 Waterman Building, (802) 656-2132,33.